

Cranial injuries and patterns of interpersonal violence in two Early Medieval skeletal populations from Germany

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Reports of violent trauma in human skeletal remains are quite common in the literature. The Early Medieval period of Europe is no exception. Many reports however focus on only one or a few cases of spectacular wounds with no attempt to gain information on the population level which would enable comparisons of trauma rates and applied fighting techniques between different burial sites. In order to provide new data for this period and to identify patterns in the anatomical and demographical distribution of interpersonal violence, a large skeletal population (n=907) from a recently excavated cemetery in Mannheim has been thoroughly screened for evidence of violent interactions.

Unambiguous evidence of interpersonal violence is largely restricted to the skull. Other bones are rarely involved. Sharp force injuries (eg swordcuts), healed and unhealed, were seen only in men, sometimes in the same individuals. There is a clear predominance of trauma to the left side of the skull and lethal blade wounds are found mainly on younger adults. Blunt force injuries are also chiefly present on males, but not exclusively so.

The results from the completely excavated very large cemetery of Mannheim-Seckenheim are compared to another, much smaller and very fragmentary cemetery from Bitburg, which, in relation to its preserved skeletal remains, shows a high number of cranial injuries. It is discussed how site context and preservation, number of individuals and the condition of the bones can affect the interpretation of archaeological sites regarding interpersonal violence.

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